

# The History of Perfins (Perforated Initials)

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## Introduction

As we all know postage stamps were introduced in England in 1840 and their popularity quickly grew across the world.



Generally countries that were issuers of postage stamps allowed the stamps to be redeemed for cash at the Post Office. This meant that postage stamps were in a way another form of currency. The same was generally true for other stamp instruments such as revenue stamps.

This practice was followed in Australia until as recently as the 1980's where postage stamps could be redeemed for 90% of their face value and values over 50 cents were able to be used to pay telephone bills.

Given the close relationship between postage stamps and money the issue of theft and misuse quickly surfaced.

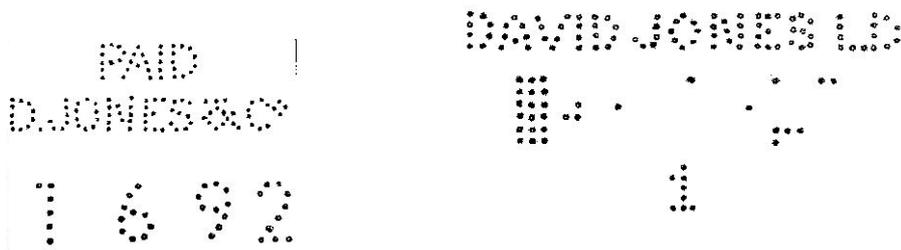
## The Perforator is born



In 1858, Londoner, Joseph Sloper was granted a patent for a device which could perforate holes in the form of letters and symbols into cheques and other financial instruments so as to prevent these from being reused or otherwise fraudulently handled.

Such devices featured fixed names but variable number sections so that they could be used to show details such as day/month/year. They became popular for banks and other financial institutions, such as Insurance Companies, but they also proved popular with large commercial firms who used them to cancel incoming orders

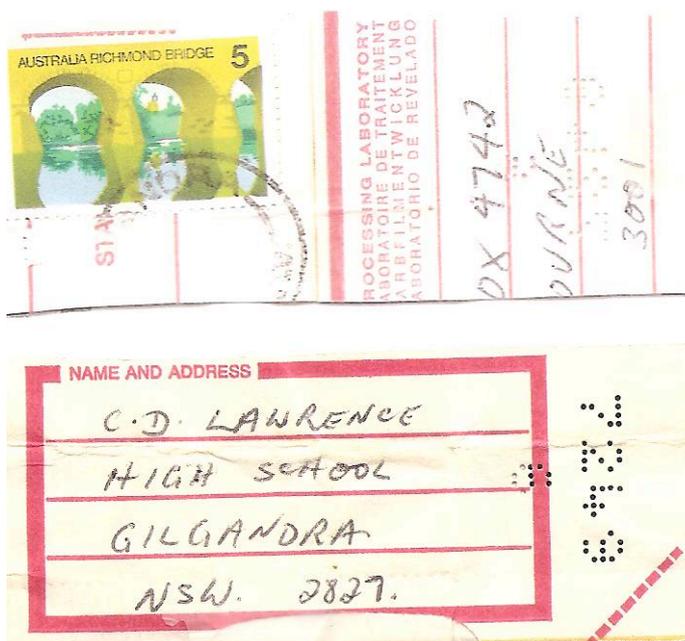
and correspondence so as to validate date of receipt.



Devices used by David Jones between 1890 until 1958

These kinds of devices were still in limited use until recent times although technologies such as micro filming and more recently scanning and bar coding have replaced them.

A popular example of use of such a device in recent times is Kodak numerals. These blocky numerals are encountered on stamps from all over the world as it was Kodak's global policy to use these kind of devices to provide a unique code to all incoming film received for processing.



Example of Kodak numerals front and back

These Kodak strikes are quite often found as partial strikes on stamps and it seems that the receiving staff took some joy in making sure that the stamps were struck in some way.

The Kodak and other Cancelling strikes are not regarded as "true" perfins as "true" perfins are only those associated with the use as a Security device.

## The Perforator meets the Postage Stamp

Given the growing issues of theft associated with postage stamps Joseph Sloper sought to extend the application of his perforating devices to postage stamps so that the true owner of the stamps could be known.

He approached the Post Office (in England) and after considerable correspondence and argument, in 1868 the Post Office gave permission for Sloper's devices to be used on postage stamps and most importantly they altered their own regulations so that perforated stamps perforated with perfins could not be redeemed for cash.

The Perfin was born.

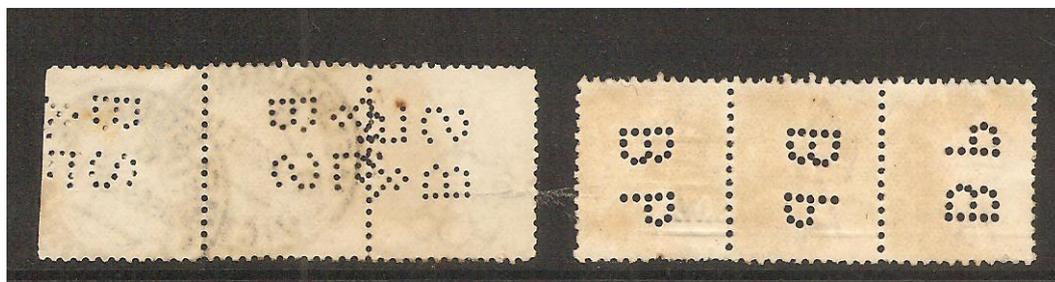
England at this time was one of the key manufacturing centres in the world and the presence of perfins on their international mail would have helped to promote the use of perfins all over the world.

Just as with the invention of the postage stamp, everybody loves a good idea, and perfins soon became popular across the world. In time they were used in more than 200 countries.

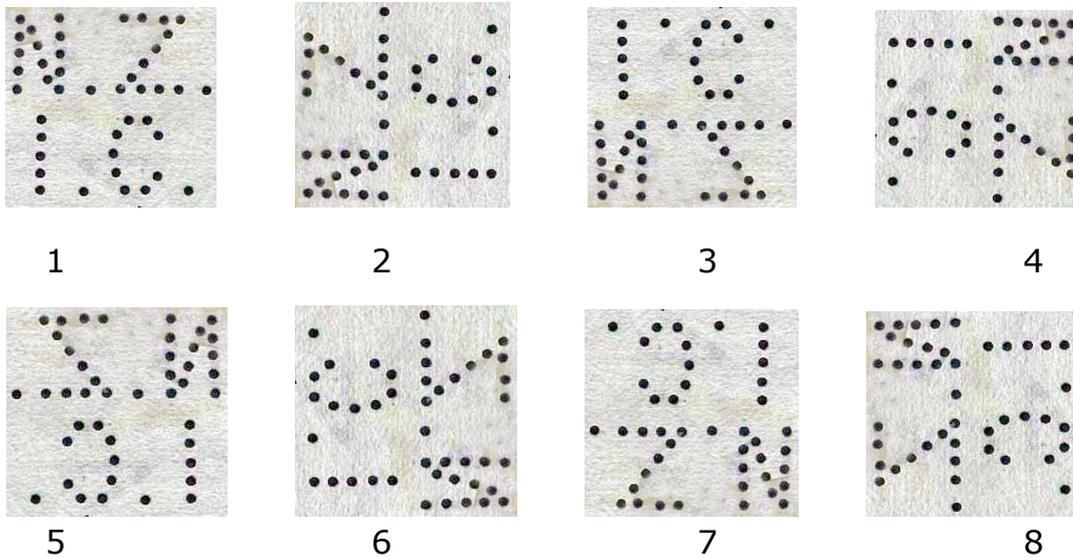
Just in England there are over 23,500+ different patterns, Germany has 12,000+, USA 6,400+, and France 3000+. Australia has over 3500 but that is a story in itself that I will address later.

Most of these patterns were made on small single die devices that struck just one stamp at a time, although in the USA, who adopted perfins later, devices of 3 - 10 dies were more common.

To achieve the fastest puncturing with these single die devices some enterprising, or in some instances lazy, clerks would fold part sheets of stamps up so that one strike of the device would place strikes in many stamps.



This was not particularly good for the longevity of the perfin devices, but it does lead to an array strikes in various positions as follows:



For some time users were most careful and the majority of perfins are punctured in position 1. This is particularly true of the patterns of England, Germany and the USA.

But this was not always the case and indeed the possibilities are not limited to just these 8 positions as evidenced by this Vacuum Oil strike on a block of 4d Olive Queen Victoria from Victoria in 1905.



For these reasons few if any Commercial perfin collectors bother with collecting the various positions. Such positional specialisations tend to be limited to the collecting of Australian State Government perfins where the volume of material permits a level of study that is not possible with Commercial patterns.

## Perfins in Australia

There are isolated examples of strikes from Sloper and similar cancelling or document devices but the first device used on postage stamps in Australia is the 2 die device of D&J Fowler (Adelaide) which came into service around 1880. The device was made by Slopers and it was of a high quality remaining in service until at least 1954.



The Right hand is SG 275 c which is a rare variation of the 1902 – 04 issue

At this time many of the larger companies operating in the various States of Australia had buying offices in England, mainly in London. For this reason many of the early devices found used in Australia are from Slopers. Interestingly Slopers kept a sample book of all their devices and this still exists today and is in the possession of the GB Perfin Society.

Regrettably the same cannot be said of other manufacturers in England and Australia and given that only a handful of devices have survived to modern times we know very little about these early devices and their makers.

The number of devices in use in Australia grew steadily through the 1880's and early 1890's with most users being large retail companies with high postage usage associated with the growing use of mail order.

The early 1890's saw an economic depression in all States of Australia and this likely lead to an increase in the demand for perforating devices to address possible losses from theft or misuse.

Enter, Edward Thomas Moulden, who in 1893, approached the Victorian Postmaster General seeking permission to perforate stamps for a small group of clients (14). We have not found perfin patterns to refer to all of these users so it is possible that some were companies who had expressed interest in the concept or they were just names used by Moulden to give weight to his application. Interestingly the records show no later requests by Moulden yet we know that he went onto perforate stamps for many customers over the next 20 years. In the study of the commercial use of perfins in Australia it is not

Moulden's lack of approvals that is important, but rather the unusual way he approached perforating stamps.

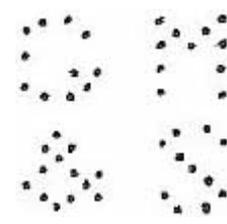
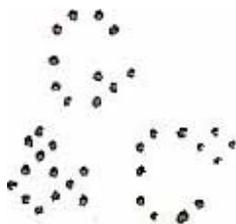
## The Moulden Method – “Victorian Service Punctures”

As explained earlier, easily the largest usage of perfin was in England with 23,500+ known patterns. Germany has 12,000+, USA 6,400+ and France 3000+. Australia has over 3500 and much of this is because of Moulden.

Apart from a few scattered and largely unconfirmed examples, perfin were generally produced by perforators that were owned by the user, to perforate stamps purchased from the Post Office. Such perforating devices are known as “customised” perforators as they were designed for a given customer and carried that customer's initials and none other.

Moulden's way was different, as he acted as a licensed stamp vendor selling postage stamps to users and as part of his service he punctured the user's initials or logo into the stamps he sold.

To achieve this he used a single die device that had a die which could be reset to create different pin layouts and therefore different letter combinations and layouts. Such perfin are called “service punctures”. Because the provision of the perfin was a service.



Moulden would generally create a fresh die setting for each new batch of stamps so the pattern could change from one batch to the next. There is some evidence to support the case that he could “store” a particular letter in a die as there are examples of patterns with the same letter structures but different spacing between the letters.

One of Moulden's largest customers was the retailer Robert Reid and Co and he sold perforated stamps to the company over a period of 20 years. This is odd in itself because Robert Reid had there own customised device. There are more than 100 patterns attributed to Robert Reid including over 50 different RR's as well as RRC's, RR&C's and RR&CO's.

Of the over 3500 Australian perfin patterns, as many as 2800 are attributable to Moulden and other providers who used the "service puncture" method. Moulden was by no means the only vendor who offered this service but he would seem to have been the most prolific.

An additional factor that influenced the number and variation of perfins produced by Moulden was his failing eyesight. He was effectively blind by the early 1900's. His business continued however, with assistance and his patterns are found used up until the early 1920's and into the early 1930's.

## Enter the Government



Prior to Federation there was no use of perfins by Government Departments with the exception of English Government with the triangular convict mail puncture of Tasmania and the Commissariat punctures used in West Australia. South Australia used Departmental Overprints.

With Federation (1901) both State and Federal Departments sought to identify their own stamps and most asked the Postmaster General for permission to overprint. Oddly this rather cost effective option (it had been used effectively in South Australia) was refused and the use of perforation devices was suggested.

So the Federal and State Governments quickly sourced a range of multi die devices with around 6 - 12 dies in either a horizontal or vertical array, variously OS (many formats), WA, OS/NSW (2), and SA. The matter of codifying and collecting these patterns is made difficult by the fact that the Federal Government Departments were located all over Australia, but mainly in Melbourne. This led to the periods of sharing of perforated stamps between Federal and State Departments in some locations such as Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia, while other States such as NSW, South Australia and Tasmania chose not to share and had their own State devices from around 1902. Furthermore at certain times the stamps of Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania were all printed in Melbourne and at these times they shared the same and OS device/pattern.

The advent of Australian Commonwealth issues (1913) and the various OS perfins on these issues did not simplify it greatly as some Federal and State Departments continued to share, that is with the exception of NSW and Tasmania. That is until about 1931 when the Federal Government finally saw the wisdom of overprinting.

The overprinting for Federal use did not last long but some of the perforators that were introduced for State use did:

NSW	OS, OSNSW (3), then GNSW (4) until 1989
Queensland	Did not perforate after 1913
South Australia	Did not perforate after 1913
Tasmania	Continued to use their T until 1975
Victoria	Used VG (4) until 1988
Western Australia	Used W/A until 1954

## **The big users of Commercial Perfins**

The difficult days of the depression of the 1890's gave way to the better times of the start of the new century and although the service punctures, in the style of Moulden, continued to be popular in the first decade, this popularity waned and the types of users changed back to the companies that had first used perfins in Australia.

What is more the technology of the devices had improved and now large users such as Anthony Hordern and David Jones were able to purchase large multi die devices from suppliers such as Slopers and others, mainly in the UK.

The major users of perfins were once again the mail order retailers and the emerging corporate users such as those involved in the growing industries of Insurance, Coastal trading, Warehousing, Pastoral management, Agricultural machinery, Film processing and Oil products.

These companies were the most common users of perfins into the 1920's and 30's and although their usage dropped off in later decades some were still users of perfins into the 1960's and a few into the 1970's.

## **Perfins – the Curtain closes**

Although some Governments and private companies still used perfins into the 1970's and beyond the need for this security measure was passing with the arrival of bulk mailing and franking machines which meant that larger mail users no longer needed to use actual stamps.

Today the perfins that once served a key role in the processes of commerce and Government have become just an oddity, largely misunderstood and in some ways, understudied.